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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 000563

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ES](#)

SUBJECT: ARENA POLITICAL DIRECTOR ON OPPOSITION PLANS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: (Conservative) ARENA's new Political Affairs Director believes the party must be willing to support intelligent (left-wing) FMLN proposals and oppose dangerous ones in order to mount a credible opposition to the Funes Government and position itself for 2012 legislative elections. He expressed concern about some Funes Administration officials and urged the U.S. to be vigilant in defending Salvadoran democratic institutions. He acknowledged rumors that the FMLN is seeking to attract Assembly Deputies with large cash offers, but believes ARENA's legislative bloc is unlikely to be swayed. End Summary.

¶2. (C) PolCouns met June 17 with Rafael Salome Chain, new Political Affairs Director in COENA, ARENA's executive board. Salome said that while he has long been an ARENA sympathizer, this is his first formal position in the party. He said he found the FMLN's opposition to anything and everything proposed by the Saca Administration frustrating, and pledged to do his utmost to help ARENA mount a more intelligent opposition to the Funes Administration, supporting sensible proposals and opposing dangerous ones. If ARENA does this, he said, it will be well positioned for 2012 legislative elections.

¶3. (C) Salome expressed concern about several Funes officials, particularly VP and Education Minister Salvador Sanchez Ceren and Minister of Public Security Manuel Melgar. Salome said he was sanguine about the Funes (non-FMLN) economic team, noting that this group will be, in the short-term, saddled with the most painful decisions. In contrast, hard-line FMLN elements now have control of key institutions, through which they can exercise security and territorial control through the police. In addition, he believes the Ministry of Education is ripe for patronage given its extensive presence throughout El Salvador. Salome expressed concern that Sanchez Ceren will attempt to push through radical changes in curricula, to indoctrinate a generation of Salvadorans along the lines of the Cuban or Venezuelan educational systems. In this and other areas, Salome said, ARENA must be especially vigilant, and he asked the same of the U.S. PolCouns said the U.S. had made clear its willingness to work with the Funes government but, as with previous ARENA governments, would not be shy in expressing concern when needed.

¶4. (C) Salome noted that, for the first time since the 1992 Peace Accords, ARENA was in opposition; its bloc of Assembly Delegates would be at the forefront of ARENA's efforts to prevent the FMLN from pursuing a radical agenda. He acknowledged that, to do real damage, e.g., change the constitution to permit re-election of a President or change lengths of terms, the FMLN would require a two-thirds majority, which was unlikely. Salome said he had heard rumors that some ten opposition Deputies, including ARENA's, were being targeted by the FMLN to switch parties. Salome said he believed ARENA Deputies were united, and that those most likely to switch sides would be from smaller parties

allied with ARENA, especially those with high levels of personal debt. He said he had heard rumors of million-dollar offers, though said he had not spoken to any Deputies who had been approached. Salome said that, two months earlier, his judgment might have been different, but noted that for the first time in its history, ARENA's legislative bloc had elected its own President (speaker) and Vice President, who were both closely involved in COENA's weekly strategy meetings.

¶5. (C) Salome said ARENA planned to establish a new position in COENA for international relations in order to better build bridges with foreign governments and parties. He asked about funding and other assistance that might be available from the U.S., especially from the International Republican Institute. PolCouns undertook to put Salome in touch with IRI and urged him to reach out to the National Democratic Institute, as well, given both organizations' non-partisan approach overseas.

¶6. (C) Bio notes: Salome served as a Vice Minister for Telecommunications for two years during the Saca Administration. He is 46, married, and is currently employed as a telecom consultant. He lived in Louisiana for a number of years, graduated from LSU, and has a daughter finishing university in Boston. He also has two teenage daughters in San Salvador who attend the British School.

¶7. (C) Comment: Our meetings with Salome and other ARENA contacts give us confidence that the Salvadoran government will not be able to bully the legislature. The private sector and media also give no indication they will allow themselves to get rolled by the hard-line FMLN.

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